

1936: Fascists and Police Routed - the Battle of Cable Street

Cable Street - October 4th 1936 - an eye witness account by Reg Weston, Higham resident and life-time NUJ member.

I was at the Battle of Cable Street. In my early twenties, I was then secretary of the recently formed Southgate branch of the Communist Party in North London.

On that warm October Sunday afternoon, October 4 1936, we had organised a party of (now over sixty years later, I put it at) about forty, (probably it was fewer) people. They were members and sympathisers who we had mobilised in the three or four days before. [libcom edit - the Communist Party initially opposed workers turning up to fight the Blackshirts. It was only after they were already being organised that the CP jumped on the bandwagon.]

We had set out by bus and tube to oppose the proposed march of Sir Oswald Mosley and his several thousand Blackshirts through the East End of London.

As we arrived at the tube station in Aldgate we had no idea of what had been happening in the surrounding streets during the hours before.

We came to the tube entrance, together with hundreds of people who had been on the same train. There we stopped.

The pavements were packed, the whole street - Aldgate High Street - was packed solid. Crowds were everywhere as far as we could see. It was impossible to make any progress. Parked in the middle of the street, towering over the crowds was a line of trams - abandoned and empty. They could not have moved, even if anyone had wanted to move them.

The rumour went that the first tram in the line had been deliberately driven to the point by an anti-fascist tram driver, placed there to form a barricade against the fascists.

As we stood blocked from moving on there came the sound of shattering glass. One of the big plate glass windows of the store at Gardiners Corner was smashed in. Rumour said that a policeman had been thrown through it, but it was probably just a victim to the sheer pressure of the crowds. There was not a single policeman in sight. We did not see one for hours.

The thousands of police, 10,000 according to reports, were busy down the road where they had been battling to force a way through for the Mosleyites.

As I said, I was at the Battle of Cable Street. But that was not literally true. My comrades and I never had a chance to get within a mile of Cable Street on that afternoon. In between us and Cable Street was a solid mass of people. Estimates afterwards said there was anything up to half a million people out on the streets of the East End that day. But no one could possibly have counted them.

So we stood there, packed like sardines, for an hour or so while all sorts of rumours and tales floated through the crowds. No one could say exactly what was happening. But we gathered that the first protesters had been up early in the day and had been preparing a reception for both the police and the fascists long before either had arrived.

The fascists were assembling by the Royal Mint and police started to make baton charges, both foot and mounted, to try to clear a way for them to escort a march. They did not succeed. A barricade started to go up. A lorry was overturned, furniture was piled up, paving stones and a builders yard helped to complete the barrier. The police managed to clear the first, but found a second behind it and then a third. Marbles were thrown under the hooves of the police horses; volleys of bricks met every baton charge.

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At last the Metropolitan Police chief, who had been directing operations, told Sir Oswald it would be impossible for him to have his march through the East End to his proposed rally in Victoria Park. The uniformed Blackshirts formed up and marched. But they marched west not east. They went through the deserted City of London and ended up on the Embankment, where they just dispersed - defeated.

Back in Stepney and the East End there was almost unbelievable delight. We had won. The fascists had been defeated and humiliated. The police too and the authorities had been proved unable to protect them.

Hastily a victory march had been organised to follow the route from Cable Street to Victoria Park where Mosley had planned to address his army. Hundreds joined in. Thousands stood on the pavements and in the roads, clapping and cheering as we marched on. In those days we marched, often in ranks of fours, under the leadership of the ex-servicemen of the not so far away World War I. We marched and we sang.

We sang the traditional working class marching songs and anthems: the Internationale ("Arise ye starvelings from your slumbers"); the Italian revolutionary Bandiera Rossa ("Avanti popoli, alla riscossa" , "Forward ye workers, into the struggle

" , "Fling to the

breezes the scarlet banner"); the Berlin workers' song Rote Wedding ("Left, left .. the workers are marching again"); the Polish Varshavianka, and the old Wobbly song

"Solidarity Forever" , with the appropriate words: "We'll hang Oswald Mosley on a sour apple tree ... when the red revolution comes" .

Not all the bystanders clapped and cheered. At a few of the street corners in Bethnal Green and Hackney on the way - a very few - there were knots of those who jeered and spat and stretched out their right arms in salute to their leader. Mosley had his roots in the East End, not so much in the working class but in those intermediate groups, the lower, lower, middle class of costermongers, street traders, market stallmen, small shopkeepers, bookies' runners and those living by their wits - the people one sees today pictured on EastEnders - those who Marx described as the petit bourgeoisie [libcom edit - the author wrote "lumpen proletariat"

but this refers not to small businessmen but to the underclass and criminals so we believe the terms were mixed in error and so made the correction]. They jeered us and, strangely enough, no one retaliated - except with words.

Things moved too fast. We were marching to a victory assembly in -

appropriately - Victoria Park. We listened to the speeches, listened to the stories of those who had been in the front line, at the barricades, and then went home.

I was at the Battle of Cable Street but not in the front line - that was to come later in North Africa and in Italy.

Two myths have grown up around the event, which of course was a milestone in the long history of working class struggle. One is that the opposition to the Mosley fascists was almost entirely Jewish. The other is that the "battle" was between the protesters and the Blackshirts. It was not - it was a battle with the police.

There was a quarter to half a million people in the East End streets that Sunday. Many of them were Jews because, as Mosley knew and had campaigned for some years and so designed his provocative action on anti-Semitic propaganda, Stepney and Whitechapel had at that time the largest Jewish community in Britain. But it was numbered in tens, not hundreds, of thousands. The packed crowds that day consisted of many thousands of non-Jewish Londoners.

As far as the religious leaders of the Jewish community were concerned, the Board of Deputies of British Jews, their top authority, made special calls the previous week opposing

any physical confrontation with the Mosleyites, urging their congregation to stay indoors.

They pursued the same fatal policy that the Jewish leaders in Germany had pursued only four or five years before when faced with the brownshirts of Hitler. We know where that led.

But their followers had more sense. They came out in their thousands. The opposition in the East End itself was organised largely by the grassroots Jewish organisations, the workers'

circles, the furniture and garment workers' trades unions, by the shops and the workshops.

It was also organised, on almost a military scale, in the last few days by the Communists who had a great deal of influence and a vigorous membership in the area. At that time the Communist Party in Britain was a party with strong roots

in the trade unions, in many workplaces and among the unemployed. A significant section of the cultural and intellectual classes also were members or sympathisers of the Party. Writers, artists, actors, musicians and scientists contributed.

Only a month before, the London District of the Party had organised a pageant march from the Embankment to Hyde Park in celebration of English radical and working class history. It was choreographed by leading actors and stage producers, with floats depicting the Peasants'

Revolt and on to the Chartists and the General Strike. At the rally in the park a thousand new members were recruited to the party.

The protest at Cable Street was not just an East End event. Anti-fascists came from all over London and nearby. It should be remembered this was a time when few people had cars, or the money to travel long distances by rail or by coach. Cable Street was an all-London event.

No coach parties or hired trains came from Aberdeen, Plymouth, Manchester or Birmingham.

The Mosleyites had announced their provocative rally on the Saturday so that there was almost less than a week to mobilise. There had been no details of assembly times or routes.

This was also a time when few people had telephones or access to them, except by public call boxes. There was no TV. Radio was still almost a novelty.

So our communications were through knocks on doors, notes through letter boxes, the post, meetings in the street, or at work, and by word of mouth. That is what we did. That is what people did all over the capital. In those days our main source of information was the newspapers. There was not only the Daily Worker, with a circulation of some 40,000 and a readership of many more. There was also the Daily Herald, the organ of the TUC and the mouthpiece of the Labour Party, which went into a million homes, plus the radical Liberal News Chronicle with several hundreds of thousands. On Sunday there was the left wing Reynold's News, run by the Co-operative Party.

In London itself there were three evening papers, each producing four or five editions a day from early morning on. The Evening News was the stablemate of

the right wing, fascist-supporting Daily Mail; the Evening Standard was linked with the chauvinist Tory Daily Express and there was also the radical Star. Each had circulations of hundreds of thousands.

The Daily Worker acted as the main organiser for the protests centrally. By midweek we were getting plenty of information and so were its thousands of readers, especially in the factories and workplaces such as the bus garages and the rail depots. This paper told us of the approaches to the Home Office by mayors of the East London boroughs, of petitions, one of around 100,000, seeking for a ban on the march or a change of route.

It also told of the ostrich-like attitude of the Jewish authorities and the same stance of the Labour Party, locally and nationally. "Keep away" had been the theme of a leading article in the Daily Herald, echoing the words of Mr George Lansbury, recently leader of the Labour Party and himself an MP for an East End constituency. The Daily Worker printed a special supplement calling for "the biggest rally against fascism that has yet been seen in Britain" .

On the Sunday morning we took this round the streets of the small, council estates in Southgate. We sold them at almost every other house. Whether we had leaflets I do not recall.

I doubt it. The local branch would not have had enough cash to produce them. Our main propaganda medium then was by chalking slogans on walls and in the roads. There was much less traffic in those days. I do remember we chalked thoroughly all the entrances to the great Standard Telephones cable factory in New Southgate where 10,000 went to work everyday.

Southgate, Palmers Green, Winchmore Hill was a very middle class suburb which its council aimed to rival Ealing as the "Queen of the London Suburbs" . It even had its 'millionaires'

row'. There were small areas of working class homes in Bowes Park and New Southgate but Toryism was dominant. For many years the borough shared the distinction, with Canterbury, of being the only town in England without a single Labour councillor on their council. There was a Labour Party with a few left-wingers and a 50 strong Labour League of Youth which had its own premises and with which we in the Communist Party had good relations. A bunch of them came with us to Cable Street. So did busmen from the garages at Palmers Green,

Muswell Hill and Potters Bar, where we had influence and small groups. In all we managed to mobilise a respectable contingent. That kind of mobilisation was going on all over London in the handful of days before the event.

1936 had already been a year of pregnant events. The possibility, the probability, of a second world war was gathering momentum every day. Mussolini had conquered and occupied Abyssinia (Ethiopia). Hitler, with Germany firmly under his thumb, and socialists and communists and trade unionists executed or in concentration camps, had marched in the Rhineland (occupied by the British and French after the First World War) and was threatening Czechoslovakia and Poland. General Franco had begun his rebellion against the Spanish republican government. Japan was spreading its invasion and conquest of Manchuria into the rest of China. Almost the only bright spot on the horizon was, in our minds, the coming to power of the Popular Front government of socialists and liberals, supported by communists, in France.

In Britain the working class movement was still convalescing from the effects of the General Strike of 1926, and of the great economic crisis of 1929 and the thirties, which had led to the split in the Labour Party and the 'treachery' of Ramsay Macdonald and the last Labour government. Non-unionism was rife and the anti-working class actions of the National Tory government were vicious against the unemployed and their families. That was the world in which we lived, a very different one from that which faces us today. There was a feeling in the air that change was coming and some of us were arrogant enough, or naïve enough, to believe we could influence that movement toward change.

So the victory at Cable Street was a great lift up. It was certainly an important signpost along the road of declining Mosleyite influence in the East End and in Britain.

The Jews in 1936 were one of the ethnic minorities in the country. Black or brown faces were hardly ever to be seen. Apart from the Irish, and the Greek Cypriots in North London, there were no large communities for the fascists to target to stir up racism.

We were given positive proof that it was possible to rouse the masses, despite the opposition and wet blanketing of the Labour Party, the 'respectable' 'liberal', authorities and organisations. It showed what organisation could do even in the most difficult of circumstances. The do-nothings, the stay-at-homes, the heads-

in-the sand were quite clearly shown up to be empty windbags.

'Twas a famous history."

Reg Weston - Higham resident and life-time National Union of Journalists member

From Revolutions Per Minute